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Why Teens Today Wear the Brands They Wear and  
How This is Affected by Reference Groups

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### Abstract

This paper describes and reports the results of a study that examines how teenagers choose to purchase and wear different brands. I wanted to find out if they would be affected positively or negatively towards different brands when they were associated with their membership, aspirational, or dissociative reference groups as well as how a teenager decides what brands are relevant to them or convey what they want to convey about themselves. Through the exploration of friends, hobbies, advertising, social media, situational factors, parents, through interviews, along with the help of many scholarly articles, I was able to find out what teenagers ages thirteen through eighteen feel about why they wear what they wear. This paper also discusses implications of the research and how we can use this information to appeal to the approaching new generation of consumers. This research is important because adolescents are forming brand loyalties now and are a growing group of consumers. At this point in their lives, teens begin to get jobs, and companies need to be able to appeal to this age group in order to maximize profits and hold onto this group's interest as they age.

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**Hypotheses**

When it comes to brand loyalty in teens there are a few major areas that I hypothesized would affect what teenagers ages thirteen through eighteen choose to wear. The first area is how the teenagers feel about certain brands when other demographics are wearing those brands. I hypothesized the teenagers will have a negative reaction to other races and socioeconomic statuses wearing the same brands as them because these are dissociative groups. I also hypothesized that they would have a positive reaction to people older than them wearing the same brands up to a certain point, probably about five years older, and after that age they would decide that a brand is no longer cool.

Too, I hypothesized the teenagers were affected by their parents' standards of modesty or "appropriateness" as well as the parent's budget in some cases. If a brand is not deemed appropriate or cost-efficient by a parent it will decrease the use of the brand but not necessarily the degree to which they find it cool.

The third area to explore was the way the teenagers find the brands they choose to wear. I hypothesized that the foremost way they find what brands to wear will be from friends, followed by hobbies, then social media, and then conventional advertising such as television. I thought that friend groups and hobbies to which the person is a member would affect the brands they choose to wear the most, followed by the groups which they aspire to be a part of, and then dissociative groups will have a negative impact on the teenager choosing to wear the specific brand.

### **Method**

These hypotheses were tested by ethnographic interviews with five different teenagers between the ages of thirteen and eighteen near their closets or wardrobes. The reason for this type of location for the in-depth interviews was to help spark conversation about the brands they choose to wear while helping the subject to provide examples of the brands that they think they associate with or aspire to associate with. While I had a set group of interview questions for each interviewee to answer, what I asked was not necessarily restricted to this list. If the opportunity presented itself, I went further in-depth on certain questions that the teenager had a particularly passionate response to or idea about. The point for this ethnography was to get the whole story by discovering more about how teenagers relate to and feel about brands based on their membership, aspirational, and dissociative groups as well as their parents' role in the decision making process. The teenagers were also asked about their planned longevity of brand usage and how they feel about wearing the same brands for long periods of their life in order to compare it with how they feel about older people wearing the same brands as them.

For the interviews, I recorded them in video form and then transcribed them so I was able to pick out pieces of information that shine light on the constructs studied. The transcripts from each interview were compared to see if the teenagers feel similarly about some areas of branding but then different about others.

### **Finding “Cool” Brands**

When a child is in his teenage years, he is in the reflective stage of consumer socialization which means that his knowledge of brands, pricing, and advertising are becoming more complex along with his desire to fit in and to fill his identity with meaning (John, 1999). During this time between middle childhood and adolescence, the child will look to groups to fill

their social void and to provide a sense of belonging, so he will start to associate brands with symbolic ideas of what he wants to be. The brands he will begin to like relate to his self-concept, his membership groups, and the characteristics of others who wear those brands (Chaplin & John, 2005). He will start to care more about how he looks in order to conform to these groups and will be more involved in the clothing purchasing process.

Teenagers use brands to symbolically show the world their personality and traits as well as what they'd like to be portrayed as. They see clothing as important for making first impressions, associating with others that wear the same brands, and they agree that you can tell a lot about a person by looking at what they are wearing (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Once they have been socialized in the importance of clothing and brand names the question is, "Should I conform or portray individuality?" I have found that teenagers have a tendency to think they are very individual and do not fit in to a certain clique or stereotype with what brands they wear, but then when shown what they have in their closets it all looks quite similar in terms of brands.

When studying why teens wear the brands they wear, the answer is inevitable. "Because it's cool." But what makes a brand of clothing cool? Fitton, Read, Horton, Little, Toth, and Guo (2012) proposed that there is a hierarchy of cool to start with when looking at what makes something cool. At the bottom, one will find "having cool stuff." Then, in the middle, "doing cool things." And at the top, "being cool." If a teen sees that someone who they think is cool doing cool things while wearing a brand name, this is what makes a brand cool. For instance, the first respondent of my interviews associated with a mountain biking group. On Instagram, he follows "cool" mountain bikers that also do tricks on their bikes. He stated that if he saw a t-shirt on one of these mountain biking influencers while he was doing a flip that he would be more inclined to look up the t-shirt online to purchase it, and if he did not purchase it that day, he

would be more likely to purchase it if he was it in-stores than if he had not seen the mountain biker wearing it. In this paper I will argue that what makes a brand cool is the people that associate with this brand being a part of a person's membership or aspirational group while also relating to this person's hobbies and being within their reach.

### **Friends**

Out of brand importance for mother, brand importance for father, peer influence, and TV exposure, the only factor that influenced both boys' and girls' brand sensitivity with a statistical significance was peer influence (Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003). With girls, however, brand importance for father was the only other factor with significance even though mothers are seen in most cases as the more fashion-savvy parent.

This effect is reversed when it comes to luxury brands, however (Gil, Kwon, Good, & Johnson, 2012). Luxury brand purchases have been found to link more to personal values than to an aspiration to impress peers.

### **Hobbies**

The boys in this study were most emphatic about hobbies as an influence in their wardrobe. Sportswear brands dominated the scene in their closets, and when they were asked they admitted to choosing most of their clothing based on sports as a hobby. For this interviewee, his use of sportswear brands began just for sports but then worked their way into his everyday wardrobe.

“When you wear like Under Armour and Nike, they make also stuff that you can wear when you are playing sports like long sleeve undershirts for when it's a little bit colder. The reason I got hooked into it is because I got some of those that were really warm

and comfortable so I thought I could use those in my everyday clothes.”

This respondent, previously mentioned as the boy who associates with the mountain biking group, agrees fully that his clothing brands are based on his hobbies.

“Alright so the amount of clothing in your closet that you have based on your hobbies would make up what percent of your closet?”

“50.”

“What would you say the other half is?”

“Stuff that’s too small and I don’t want to throw away.”

The girls, however, were not so sure that their hobbies affected the brand they chose to wear except for one of the girls. This respondent said that she based her brand choices off of the hobby of video gaming because her favorite brand, The Yeti, makes graphic tees that are popular with gamers and they also advertise on live-streamed video gaming events.

### **Advertising**

Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille (2003) were unable to find any evidence that correlates television watching with brand sensitivity, that is, the exposure to a brand and psychological process that leads up to a purchase.

Research indicates that the traditional television ad is no longer relevant for today’s teenager (Spero & Stone, 2004). They are multitasking, playing on phones during shows and commercials, downloading music, and scrolling through their five plus social media sites. This research by Spero and Stone is a testament how much more we should be paying attention to the



changing field of marketing when trying to advertise products because since their paper came out in 2004, the Internet has gained sites and apps such as Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and Snapchat. In 2004, thefacebook.com was being founded and television ads were already being regarded as irrelevant for adolescents.

In my study, in all but one instance the respondents were able to recall the last clothing commercial they saw on television but they also said in all of these cases that they did not have plans to purchase the product they saw in the advertisement. The one interview that was not able to recall the last television commercial he saw said that he would be more likely to pay attention to an ad on Instagram without any prodding in that direction.

“When was the last time you saw a commercial on television for a clothing brand?”

“Probably yesterday, I just don’t remember.”

“What do you usually do during commercial breaks?”

“Listen to music if I’m in my room, or go on my phone until the show is back on.”

## **Social Media**

The great thing about social media is that people join because they want to connect with others and businesses can intercept their attention along the way. As explained in Laroche, Habibi, and Richard’s study from 2012, the same effects that social media has on its members like increasing connection, increase information sharing, and positively influencing relationships also can be used for brands to do the same thing. They connect with customers on a different level than ever before, and even though it can take more work to facilitate the communication between brand and customer, it makes those customers more loyal.

Electronic word-of-mouth is the way that people spread their knowledge about brands and communicate with companies. All the way from YouTube stars and Instagram fashion influencers to everyday Facebook accounts are engaging in electronic word-of-mouth when they share something about a brand. This is affected by a person's predisposition to be engaged in fashion activity and brand activity rather than an interest in a particular product (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). From this, we can see that social media is a way to build relationships with customers and should not be used to sell, sell, sell.

In my research, the interviewees all agreed that social media helps remind them of brands, but not in all cases did they think that social media was an effective means of advertising clothing brands. As one of them said, "With social media not as much because you can't get the actual connections."

### **Situational Factors**

Another way that teenagers can be persuaded to purchase or not purchase certain brands depends on certain situational factors such as who they are with when they are shopping or where they will be wearing the clothes to. According to Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol (2004), many retail stores are against groups of teens shopping together because there is likely to be disruptive behavior when they shop in groups. However, the authors argue that there are also positive effects of these groups shopping together. They found that teens who shop with their friends are more likely to spend money than those who do not and are more likely to have positive views of retail shopping in general.

Taylor and Cosenza (2002) have also studied the retail environment and shown that excitement is a key component when gaining female teen repeat customers. For brands that offer retail stores, they must keep in mind that factors such as lighting, music, smell, variety, and

design of the environment all add up to make the ambience of a store which is important to the demographic of teenagers who find shopping as a way to spend social time with friends. The teenagers will congregate where they are catered to in the ambience and where they are not rushed by salespeople who see them as a hazard.

Two of the respondents in my study stated that they wear different brands and styles on Sundays as compared with the rest of the week because of church. The first one was when I asked about a group that he would not want to be a part of and he said “the rich snobs” followed by saying the only time he would wear the same brands as that group would be on Sunday morning when he has to look nice. This situational factor of church causes some teenagers to dress differently on one day of the week, but this is also a day of the week when they are not around many peers from school and it is deemed as the right look for that specific day.

### **Effects of Parents**

Today’s teenagers regard their parents more like friends than ever before because of the focus on family. Because of this, researchers believe that the power of parents as influencers in the search for brands and products has increased (Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010). Teens are not only avoiding punishment by choosing the brands their parents prefer; they value their parents’ opinions in general. This is not always true, however, and it has been found that African-American teenagers look up to their fathers less than Caucasian ones so the effect is not as strong in this demographic (Martin & Bush, 2000).

In the interviews I conducted, there were mixed feeling about how parents affected the respondents’ choice of brands. One said he looks up to his dad for style tips since he wears nice things, and then another said she did not want to look anything like her mother even though she still wanted her mother’s approval.

**Parents as the Purchaser**

The general consensus between the students interviewed was that their parents buy them clothes at the beginning of school and for birthday and Christmas gifts, but for extra things that their parents would not normally buy because of price or brand name the teens have to buy themselves or at least contribute part of the funds. One respondent said that when he goes shopping with his mother, she points out things that are on sale and so often these are the items that he purchases. Parents as the purchaser change the brands that would be in a teens closet if their parents did not help out with buying clothes. Without them, the teenagers' closets would have fewer things with a higher percentage of brand names like Nike, North Face, or Pink because these are the items that teens say they buy themselves.

**Amount of Money Available**

All of the respondents also agreed that money does affect what they wear, but in general they believed that they would still wear the same brands if they had more or less money. The difference, however, that they noted was that they would just have more or less clothing in their closets. One respondent said that she often shops at second-hand stores when she has less money, so she still ends up with the same brand names just not new.

**Modesty**

When asked if their parents think the brands and clothing they wear are appropriate for their age, every single interviewee said yes. Given that I interviewed all teenagers with religious backgrounds, this is no surprise. One student mentioned that if his parents did not think they were appropriate, they wouldn't buy him the clothes. Another boy said that there are some brands that are banned at a local Christian school because they are deemed inappropriate at that

school. This was surprising considering that the brand he mentioned was Abercrombie and Fitch which is quite a popular brand with today's youth. However, this was at private school.

One interviewee when asked about the appropriateness of her clothes said that she dresses nice and appropriate because she does not want people to give her dirty looks or get the wrong idea about her. This confirms the research by Piacentini & Mailer (2004) that shows teens agree that clothes are a useful way to judge someone and can help or hurt first impressions.

### **Reference Groups**

The different groups that make up a person's social scene include membership groups, aspirational groups, dissociative groups, and out-groups.

### **Membership Groups**

Membership groups are the groups of people that a person shares common traits or interests with and therefore identifies as a part of that group. Escalas and Bettman (2005) conducted a study in which they asked undergraduate students to list a group to which they belonged and a group to which they did not belong. Then the participants were asked to list brands that coincided with both their membership group and their outgroup. Then, a questionnaire was given based on the two brands they mentioned to see if they identified with the two brands. The authors found that the brands that the people identified with were the ones that they felt lined up with their membership groups. They also found that not only do people find brands through their membership groups or in-groups, but the participants actually made opinions about brands based on what groups of people the brand was associated with.

“Do your friends affect what brands you choose to wear? In what sense?”

“Yeah, a lot of the kids at my school will wear basketball shoes like high tops and say hey that looks good, you could be influenced by that a lot because actually I got the black vans idea from a kid at school with the same kind of khaki pants that I had.”

### **Aspirational Groups**

Aspirational groups are groups of people that a person does not currently belong to but might like to someday. Teens that are aspiring toward a higher socioeconomic status also tend to prefer foreign luxury brands over the domestic ones (Phau & Leng, 2008).

**Symbolic Brands.** The effects of reference groups on purchasing decisions is amplified when the brand is a symbolic brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) or strongly associates with a certain group or trait. Male adolescents had higher brand sensitivity than their female counterparts according to a study done by Beaudoin and Lachance (2006), and this is most likely due to the symbolic nature of the brands teenage boys wear. These brands make sure it is easy for the consumers to match their clothes in order to get the “right look” without having to put too much thought into it. Females, however, have more of an interest in fashion in general and do not mind putting thought into their outfits and, therefore, do not have to rely on symbolic brands to make them look put together.

This data was confirmed by another study conducted by Hogg, Bruce, and Hill (1998) that shows boys are also more likely to associate brands with a certain image. In this study, kids were asked to create collages from a variety of images in order to investigate brand recognition and if the respondents understood symbolic meanings of different brands. What they found was that boys associated sportswear brands with athletes and with sports in general. They also associated the brands like Nike, Adidas, and Reebok with images related to speed and endurance.

While this study was done with young children rather than adolescents, it begins to unveil the idea that as people grow up, they begin consumer socialization by associating characteristics that they may or may not want to exhibit with different brands before they are even able to make purchasing decisions so they see brands as symbolic for different lifestyles.

### **Dissociative Groups**

Dissociative reference groups are the ones that a person does not associate with and does not desire to associate with. This differentiates dissociative groups from out-groups in that dissociative groups are a smaller set of out-groups that a person does not desire to associate with (White and Dahl, 2007). White and Dahl (2006) found through a series of studies dealing with gender and menu options that dissociative groups do have an impact on the way that consumers weigh options and make purchasing decisions. In their first study, males were more likely to choose a larger steak called the “chef’s cut” when the smaller steak was called a “ladies cut” than when the smaller steak was called something else. In their second study, the authors decided to test and see if this effect was magnified when the participants were told they would be ordering and eating the steak around others in public rather than in private. This proved to be the case, so this proves that the influence of dissociative groups on purchasing decisions is a very real one and the consumers are even more likely to base decisions against their dissociative groups when others may be watching. Products that are associated with a group that a person does not wish to be a part of will most likely not be purchased by this person.

Consumers are even more likely to avoid product that are associated with a dissociative group than a product associated with an out-group (White and Dahl, 2007). This was also the case in my interviews with the teenagers about different brands and the different cliques that wear them as shown in the “Cliques” section below.

**Age Groups.** One dissociative group I hypothesized would have an effect on what brands adolescents think are cool is an older age group.

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was fifty years older than you wearing this brand?”

“I would feel kinda lame.”

“What age would you start to feel that way?”

“I’d say probably forty, I wouldn’t want to wear the same thing.”

In all cases, the respondents were completely okay with kids younger than them wearing the same brands. This was surprising because I did not think the teens would want to be associated with a younger group. However, they feel like they are being looked up to when someone younger is imitating their style, and they think the kid just must be cool.

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was five years older than you wearing this brand, Pink?”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t wear that brand anymore.”

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was ten years older than you wearing this brand?”

“Oh no.”

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was fifty years older than you wearing this brand?”

“I’d stop shopping there completely.”

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was five years younger than you wearing this brand?”



“That’d be okay.”

**Cliques.** As teenagers are finding themselves and deciding who they want to be in life, they also have a need to belong to a certain group of people similar to them. In high school, these groups come in the form of cliques such as goth, skater, fashionistas, jocks, and many more. They can be as specific as one respondent who said he identifies with the “mountain biking hipster” group or as general as the “populars” like another one said.

In the 2011 study by Cassidy and Schijndel, they found that teenagers attribute 32 percent to their personality when asked about which clique they are a part of and why. Next in line after personality comes a twelve percent attribution to clothing choices and seven percent to music preference. All other indicators were measured as being five percent or less. This shows that not only do the cliques influence what the adolescents are wearing, but many of them think they are in the clique that they are in simply because of their personal style choices. This also indicates that wearing the wrong brands or styles could be detrimental to a teen’s spot in a group if their clothing choices reflect that of a person in another clique or outgroup.

“What’s an example of a group at school that you do not want to be a part of?”

“Well, there’s some groups at my school where they do some stuff that I’m not into like playing games on your computer at lunch and just stuff like that, so like people that sit down and talk or do homework.”

“Do they have a certain type of clothing or brands that they wear?”

“Yeah, they all seem to wear clothing that’s more like comfort shoes because they just don’t really care”

“Not very stylish?”

“Yeah”

“Could you ever see yourself dressing like them?”

“I don’t know, maybe when I’m older like the bones in my body won’t function as well, and I won’t be able to wear and wear all this cool clothing and I’ll be like uhh no I’m just gonna get these tennis shoes that actually have arch support.”

**Socioeconomic Status.** Another dissociative group that I hypothesized would have an effect on how much teenagers like a certain brand was how rich or poor a peer wearing the same brand might be. All of the interviewees agreed that someone with more money could buy more things and higher quality things, but they did not feel that if they had more or less money that they would wear different brands than they already wear.

“How would you feel if you saw someone richer/poorer than you wearing this brand?”

“Well, uh, I wouldn’t really care as much as I would judge myself saying ‘Oh if I’m wearing something like rich people wear does, this make me look stuck up?’ Or ‘I’m not looking very good if I’m wearing the same thing as someone poorer than me.’”

**Races and Nationalities.** The last dissociative group is one that varied among the respondents because I made sure to include different races in my study. I wanted to see if a

Caucasian teenager would be more sensitive to brand differences between races than a non-Caucasian one. This, however, did not make a difference. None of the respondents said they would feel differently about a brand based on the racial demographic of the people who wear it.

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was

Caucasian/Hispanic/African American wearing this brand?”

“I wouldn’t care honestly as long as they are my age group.”

The only thing that I did find in terms of race was that one respondent agreed that there are some brands that only should be worn by a Hispanic demographic such as South Pole or New York.

### **Longevity of Brand Use**

Most respondents in this study did not think they would be wearing the same brands for very long because they thought their lifestyles would probably change during and after college. The boys did not see themselves continuing to wear much Nike or Under Armour as adults because they will not be playing sports. They see themselves in suits and nicer things instead. They did agree, however that some of the brands in their closet could make the transition from teenager to adult. One example of this was one respondent being asked about the brand Charlotte Russe in her closet.

“How long has this brand been in your wardrobe?” (Charlotte Russe)

“Since probably about thirteen.”

“How long do you think you will wear this brand?”

“Probably awhile, 30 or so, they have nice business clothes there.”

### **Limitations of This Study**

All five of the teenagers interviewed in this study were from the same area because I chose participants that know me or at least are acquainted with me so they wouldn't be afraid to talk to me. This limited the scope of the type of teens I was talking to. Because of this, some of the questions seemed irrelevant to the individual interviewees:

“How would you feel if you saw someone who was African

American wearing this brand, would it make a difference?”

“Not at all, we only have like two at our school.”

Another limitation of the primary research for this study was that the teenagers interviewed like to give short answers to the questions and not elaborate. Because of this, I had to pry a bit further to get the full story. Also, the transcriptions of my interviews were difficult to look back on because much of what they said were in the form of fragments and not full sentences.

### **Conclusions**

There were several areas that I studied would affect what teenagers from thirteen to eighteen choose to wear with brand loyalty and sensitivity. Friends or peers were revealed as the foremost factor in why teens choose the brands they do because that is what they see on a day-to-day basis. I also found hobbies to be very important especially in boys because of the symbolic nature of the brands that they like. Television advertising is proving to be less and less relevant with the growth of technology and the Internet, but with that comes a growth in opportunities for online and in-app advertising which adolescents are keen on. This is reason for clothing brands that want to target teens to move to using native content for their brand on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat.

The factors that surround the ambience of stores and the situations where the teens wear brands also affect which ones they choose. It has also been found that teens shopping together can be beneficial in terms of revenues even though many stores discourage these groups from shopping together when they should be encouraging bring-a-friend promotions.

My hypothesis was correct for parent involvement and its effect on a teens clothing brand choices. It was an important factor but not the major motivating one when it came to making purchase decisions. If companies can focus on high quality and appealing to parents with modest options, these parents will be more loyal to brands that will help teens lean toward certain brands as well.

Membership groups and aspirational groups had similar effects when it came to brand choices with a positive impact on brands that are associated with a teen's membership group and also a positive impact on brands that this teen wants to be a part of.

Demographics were a part of the study on dissociative groups, and I found that there were no negative effects on brands based on race because the students I interviewed did not view other races as being out-groups. However, there was slight difference with how cool a brand is when associated with a poorer demographic because they said that they might judge themselves and the brands they wear if they saw someone that had less money than them wearing the exact brands even though this is one of the questions not everyone agreed on. I had hypothesized that the respondents would have a positive reaction to older role models wearing the same brands until about five years older and then at that point they would be negatively impacted. For the most part, this was the case, although I was surprised that the students were fine with people younger than them wearing the same brands as well.

Of the researchers' papers that I read, most were consistent with what I found in the interviews. I found that friends or peers were the most significant in terms of brand sensitivity among youth which is also the result of the study done by Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille in 2003. Another consistent result was that television advertising is no longer relevant for teens (Spero & Stone, 2004) which was also suggested by my interviewees because they could not recall TV commercials and said they play on their phones or fast forward during this time. Escalas and Bettman (2005) confirmed my hypothesis that people associate themselves with products that relate to their membership groups and was also shown in my interviews when talking about cliques. One respondent, however, did not agree with the impact of social media on brand use suggested by Wolny and Mueller in 2013.

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